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SUBJECT: NO SAG CONTINGENCY PLANNING FOR GROWING INFLUX OF  
ZIMBABWEANS

REF: HARARE 157

PRETORIA 00002646 001.2 OF 003

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11. (SBU) SUMMARY. Despite the growing influx of Zimbabweans into South Africa, the SAG has not initiated contingency planning for a refugee crisis, according to UNHCR and IOM officials. The majority of Zimbabweans entering South Africa are "victims of bad political governance," UNHCR argued, not technically "refugees" under the U.N. Refugee Convention, nor traditional economic migrants. UNHCR is concerned about the protection of vulnerable groups, especially children, crossing the border. Post recommends that PRM send a representative to South Africa to continue discussions on the situation and to consider possible avenues for U.S. engagement and assistance. END SUMMARY.

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Flow of Zimbabwean Refugees Increasing  
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12. (SBU) Numerous press and anecdotal reports suggest that the number of Zimbabweans crossing into South Africa both legally and illegally has increased significantly in recent weeks, likely in response to the deteriorating economic situation in Zimbabwe. Journalist Geoff Hill told PolOff July 23 that during a recent border visit, the South African Police Service (SAPS) told him that 3,000 Zimbabweans a day were crossing the border illegally into South Africa, what one official called a human "tsunami." South African farmers in Limpopo have complained to the South African Government (SAG) about the increase in illegal border crossings. The SAG has refused to estimate the scale, but has admitted publicly that the number of Zimbabweans crossing the border is increasing.

13. (U) Parliamentarians from the African National Congress (ANC) and opposition Democratic Alliance (DA) have visited the Zimbabwe border in recent weeks. DA Spokesman Mike Lowe said that 5,000-6,000 Zimbabweans per day are entering South Africa legally at Beitbridge (with more than half of those not returning to Zimbabwe). Lowe claimed that an even larger

number are crossing illegally, upwards of 1,000 on one farm alone. The DA has called for the establishment of refugee camps to house Zimbabweans.

14. (SBU) The recent arrivals join a large Zimbabwean exile community in South Africa. Estimates of the number of Zimbabweans living in South Africa vary widely from one to three million. DepForMin Aziz Pahad said publicly July 5 that the number "continues to increase," noting the estimate of three million. Abel Mbilinyi, Deputy Representative of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugee (UNHCR) told PolOffs and USAID/OFDA Officer that he believes the 3 million figure is exaggerated, but observed that since most Zimbabweans are in the country illegally, accurate estimates are nearly impossible.

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Little Contingency Planning  
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15. (SBU) The South African Government (SAG) has undertaken little contingency planning to deal with a possible Zimbabwean refugee/migration crisis, according to UNHCR's Mbilinyi and IOM Regional Representative Hans-Petter Boe. Mbilinyi and Boe noted that the SAG had developed contingency plans in 2001, including identifying a reception center at a former military base 60 kilometers from the Zimbabwe border, but that these plans were never put into action because the tripwires (50 people/day requesting asylum) were never triggered.

16. (SBU) Approximately two months ago, the Provincial Government of Limpopo, the province that borders Zimbabwe, invited UNHCR and IOM to a planning meeting on a possible Zimbabwean refugee/migration crisis. The provincial meeting was preliminary and did not address concrete planning issues.

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The province invited the national Department of Home Affairs (DHA) to the meeting, but DHA representatives did not show up, according to IOM's Boe. To date, the national government has not included UNHCR or IOM in formal planning meetings (if any have been held).

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Refugee Versus Migrant  
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17. (U) UNHCR's Mbilinyi commented that Zimbabweans do not fall into neat categories - refugee versus migrant, political versus economic. The majority of Zimbabweans are "victims of bad governance," not technically refugees under the U.N. Refugee Convention. Even those who might have strong asylum claims often do not articulate their cases, instead telling SAG officials they came to South Africa for a job or food. In addition, Mbilinyi commented that the "pull" factor from South Africa remains strong and will only increase in the coming years as the South African economy, particularly the construction industry, expands. Zimbabwean workers tend to be valued because of their relatively high skill levels and English language capabilities.

18. (U) Approximately 25,000 Zimbabweans have applied for asylum in South Africa since 2000, Mbilinyi said. Only a small number of those cases have been adjudicated by the South African Government, and a very small number granted asylum. Asylum applicants have the legal right to work and study in South Africa while their claim is pending.

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Protection Problem  
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19. (SBU) UNHCR's Mbilinyi noted several concerns about the protection of Zimbabweans crossing into South Africa:

-- South African law prohibits the deportation of children, yet UNHCR believes that child deportations from South Africa to Zimbabwe continue, especially by military and SAPS officials in Limpopo. (NOTE: IOM's Beitbridge Reception Centre received 1,785 unaccompanied children between January and June 2007. END NOTE.)

-- Criminals are exploiting Zimbabweans crossing the border, sometimes promising them safe passage in return for payment, but then dumping them at the border.

-- Family reunification remains a major problem, Mbilinyi said. Zimbabwean parents who live in South Africa illegally pay "facilitators" to bring their children from Zimbabwe to South Africa. Some of these facilitators abuse children or abandon them when confronted by border officials.

IOM has opened a Repatriation Centre in Beitbridge to address some of these issues (reftel) and is looking at opening a center on the South African side of the border in Musina, as well as in Plumtree, Zimbabwe, on the Botswanan border. UNHCR is training SAPS officers, the military, and Department of Home Affairs officials on protection issues.

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Possible Solutions  
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¶10. (SBU) Mbilinyi and Boe outlined several possible solutions to the Zimbabwe refugee/migration challenge:

-- Better planning: Both agreed that the SAG needs to step up contingency planning for a possible Zimbabwean migrant/refugee crisis. UNHCR hopes any contingency planning will look to the future and establish effective assistance structures, not just mechanisms to "warehouse" Zimbabweans and send them back to Zimbabwe. IOM is considering undertaking its own planning exercise for a possible Zimbabwean influx.

-- Short-term visas: Mbilinyi suggested that the SAG should

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consider creating a short-term visa program for Zimbabweans who want to cross into South Africa for a limited amount of time, or perhaps even waiving visas for Zimbabweans who cross and return the same day. Such a program for Mozambicans has dramatically reduced the number of illegal crossings from Mozambique.

-- Work visas: South African and Zimbabwean officials have discussed initiating a program to allow Zimbabweans to work in South Africa legally for a fixed amount of time. This would build on a small seasonal work permit program for farmworkers in Limpopo.

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Action Request  
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¶11. (SBU) Post requests that PRM consider sending an official to South Africa (and possibly other affected countries) to continue discussions with Post, IOM, UNHCR, NGOs, and the South African Government on this evolving situation, and to explore possible avenues for U.S. assistance. We are concerned that the deteriorating economic and political situation in Zimbabwe, particularly with elections looming in March 2008, will lead to an even greater influx of Zimbabweans into South Africa and a significant humanitarian crisis.  
Bost